

REPORT No. 2—Dressmaking.

Of the many branches of industry connected with the manufacture of women's apparel by far the most important is dressmaking, which affords employment to a great many workers, whose numbers probably amount to several thousands, though on this point exact information will not be available until the tabulation of the census returns is completed.

ACCOMMODATION.

The making of dresses is carried on largely in conjunction with the sale of materials by retail drapers, but the bulk of the work is done by persons specially designated by the term "dressmakers," whose business is carried on independently of any other trade. Some few factories also engage in dressmaking to a small extent. In the large retail shops, where it is customary to make costumes from materials sold over the counter, though the sanitary arrangements are in some instances defective, the accommodation provided is generally good, except that in six only, out of the seventeen inspected, has a separate room been allotted for the use and comfort of workers during the midday interval for rest and refreshment. Nearly 700 women and girls are employed in these shops, and the provisions for their health, comfort, and convenience may be classified as follows:—

		Good.		Fair.		Bad.		Very bad.
Light	...	7	...	7	...	3	...	0
Ventilation	...	7	...	6	...	4	...	0
Cubic space	...	7	...	7	...	2	...	1
Sanitary arrangements		7	...	6	...	3	...	1
Heating	...	2	...	4	...	0	...	0

In the smaller retail shops the conditions under which work is carried on are for the most part unsatisfactory, the workrooms, besides being in many cases too small for the health and comfort of the occupants, are insufficiently lighted, badly ventilated, untidy, and dirty. The sanitary arrangements are generally defective, separate conveniences not being provided, and it might be assumed that most of the proprietors are ignorant of the necessity of paying some attention to privacy, decency, and cleanliness, were it not for the efforts made by them to conceal from the agents employed in this inquiry the existence of the discreditable conditions under which their employees work.

In establishments where dressmaking alone is carried on the provisions for health and comfort are better in character, the premises being in most cases good private dwelling-houses, and, although in a few instances the hands are somewhat crowded, on the whole the accommodation is fair, as represented in the following table:—

		Good.		Fair.		Bad.		Nil, or not classified.
Light	...	7	...	10	...	0	...	2
Ventilation	...	4	...	13	...	1	...	1
Cubic space	...	5	...	10	...	3	...	1
Sanitary arrangements		5	...	6	...	0	...	8
Heating	...	0	...	2	...	0	...	17

The accommodation in factories, where the making of dresses forms but a small portion of the work done, will be dealt with in connection with the trades constituting the bulk of their business.

Dressmakers who work in their own homes, either entirely on their own account, or on piece-work for shops trading in women's apparel, form a large proportion of those engaged in this industry, and one or more of this class may be found in almost every street in the city, and in every town and village in the country. They work alone, or employ one or two assistants, in small rooms, usually in small terrace-houses or cottages, where the light and ventilation are often bad, and the accommodation generally of an inferior description. In the eighty-one establishments whose conditions have been investigated, 214 girls and women were employed, of whom 100 were principals and 114 assistants.

APPRENTICES.

Except in the classes under the technical branch of the Department of Public Instruction, which are attended by very few professional dressmakers, there is no proper system for teaching or learning dressmaking. In these classes two terms of the first year are devoted to measuring and drafting the separate portions of dresses, and one term to cutting and fitting them; during the second year instruction is given in practical dressmaking, and pupils who pass through the entire course should acquire sufficient knowledge and skill to enable them to cut, fit, and make up complete dresses of any material. But under the system in vogue among dressmakers the apprentices seldom acquire a sound knowledge of even one branch of the business. Many employers will not take apprentices, and in cases where they are taken, without indentures, on verbal agreements not always adhered to, and paying no premium, employers care very little whether the girls learn or not, being generally of opinion that little recompense is likely to be reaped for time and attention bestowed on so-called apprentices, who are at liberty to leave, and frequently do leave, without a moment's warning. As a rule, apprentices have little to do but run errands and wait upon other workers, their progress in the art of dressmaking depending largely on the quickness of their powers of observation and imitation. Their term of probation varies from six months to two years, but one year is the period most commonly agreed upon. A desire for change, impatience of restraint, or dissatisfaction with their employer, very often impels girls who have served a short period as apprentices in one shop to leave and engage in another as improvers, and it is a matter of common complaint that they know nothing of their business and must begin afresh. On the other side it is complained that employers frequently keep girls on apprentice wages long after they are qualified for a higher rate, and dismiss them as soon as they ask for remuneration more commensurate with the work they perform. In two years, girls of ordinary intelligence should be fully competent in at least one branch of the business, but a term of three years is recognised as necessary for complete proficiency. It might reasonably be supposed that most girls would learn plain sewing before aspiring to work demanding skill, but it is asserted that when entering their apprenticeship comparatively few

few know how even to hold a needle properly. Owing to the desultory teaching and defective training of apprentices there are a very great many half-taught, and consequently incompetent, workers who, as oft-times happens, are condemned by their lack of skill to labour on a wage hopelessly inadequate to their maintenance, and more inadequate still to the number of hours of work required of them.

HOURS OF LABOUR.

The prevailing hours of labour are from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., with an hour, or three-quarters of an hour, for the midday recess, and from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Saturdays. In a few houses 2 p.m. is the closing time on Saturdays, in some it is 3 p.m., and in others the same hours are observed as on other days. Out of thirty-four representative establishments forty-four hours are said to constitute a week's work in nineteen, forty-five hours in three, forty-six hours in three, and forty-eight hours in nine. These, however, are merely the nominal hours according to the statements of the employers, and fall far short of the actual number of working hours passed by the girls employed in many of these establishments.

The hours of labour of home-workers are governed only by their own circumstances; some who are under the necessity of earning as much as possible, or who work slowly, must work from ten to twelve hours a day, but the average working time of the whole class is considerably less than that of the shops. Out of eighty-one cases investigated, less than forty-four hours make a week's work in three, forty-four in thirty-five, forty-five in twenty, forty-six in four, forty-seven in three, and forty-eight in sixteen. In exceptional cases, where women are their own mistresses, their voluntary hours of labour extend even to eighty hours a week.

OVERTIME.

The greatest grievance among dressmakers' assistants is the system of overtime work, under which they are detained in the workrooms long after the proper closing time. It is asserted by many of the girls that they are called upon to work two or three hours' overtime two or three nights a week, and sometimes more; but the employers deny that such is the practice, though they admit that occasionally the hands are detained to finish orders promised at a certain hour, and that overtime is considered necessary for a week or two about Christmas or Easter. Only two employers admitted that overtime is frequent, the others almost unanimously asserting that it is seldom, if ever, necessary. Evidence on this point is very conflicting, that of work-girls as to overtime in shops where they are now employed being contradicted by their employers, who absolutely deny that the girls are kept later than 6 p.m. There is no doubt that the evidence of many employers in this regard is unreliable, and that overtime is the rule in most dressmaking establishments, and it is significant that, since this inquiry commenced, in not a few cases the practice has ceased, circumstances pointing to the probability that it has been suspended but not abandoned.

In cases where overtime is not brought about owing to the deliberate intention of employers to exact the greatest possible amount of work at the least possible expense, it may arise from (1) the accumulation of orders, (2) cases of emergency, or (3) the thoughtlessness of customers who neglect to give their orders until the last moment, without reflecting that work-girls must perhaps toil far into the night to finish them in time; or who fail to keep punctually their appointments for "trying on" their dresses, but nevertheless expect them to be finished in time. It is highly discreditable that the last is so frequently the cause of needless overtime work, for in such cases the girls waiting for a dress to be tried on are kept working at odds-and-ends until it is returned to them, when they must perforce toil long and late to regain the time thus wasted by the careless neglect or indifference of the customer.

It is pleasing to record that in some establishments the girls are treated more justly, the regular hours are strictly observed, extra hours of freedom next day are allowed in compensation for extra hours of work on the rare occasions when such are necessary, and the employees are not compelled to extend the hours of work beyond the number paid for. On the other hand, the proprietors of some large establishments, as well as many small shopkeepers and homeworkers, compel their employees to work without proper intervals of rest long hours beyond the time for which they are supposed to be paid. In these places the girls sometimes eat their luncheon without even leaving their seats, and immediately resume work, hurrying on in order to be earlier released, for experience has taught them that, when the job in hand cannot be disposed of within the regular hours, but can be completed that night, when 6 o'clock comes they will still be kept stitching wearily on till 7, 8, 9, or even 11 o'clock, before they may quit their work. The possible effect on the morals of young girls of compelling them to traverse without protection the midnight streets of a large city, and the injury inflicted on their bodily health by the overtime system, are very obvious evils. After bending for ten or twelve hours over their sewing, girls are too weary to have much appetite for their food, and on the morrow they rise unrefreshed to face the same monotonous routine of excessive toil, with insufficient food, rest, and exercise. Saturday is frequently the most trying day of all, because, expecting to be free at 1 o'clock, they take no lunch with them, and on such occasions it is an ordinary occurrence that they pass the whole day, from the morning till the evening meal, without refreshment of any kind. It is therefore not to be wondered at that few of the girls are robust, or that many exhibit signs of delicate health.

In large establishments the regular hours are sometimes observed in one room and not in another, because the power to keep the girls overtime rests largely in the hands of the forewoman of each room, who is expected to obtain a fixed result on the work done. The one-sidedness of the contract between employers and employed in this industry is well exemplified, in certain establishments, where the girls are fined half a day's pay if they are ten minutes late in the morning, and fined again on the flimsiest pretext, but, on the other hand, are compelled to work overtime without pay, and also in slack times to accept compulsory holidays on the same terms. The greatest sufferers in this direction are those entirely dependent on their earnings for subsistence, the exigencies of whose position silence their protests and compel them to submit to what they know to be injustice and oppression.

Payment for overtime is seldom offered, even in cases where extra hours are most common, employers claiming that, since the workers are sometimes absent and no deduction from their pay is made for public holidays, they may reasonably be expected to do extra work when it is required. For the credit of the business it is fortunate that exceptions to this odious rule are found in four establishments, where double rates are paid for overtime, and in a few other cases where pay at the rate of 6d. an hour and upwards is allowed. When detained too late to take tea at home the girls are most often paid from 3d. to 1s. for that meal. Even where overtime is paid for, however, parents, out of regard for their children's moral and physical well-being, strenuously object to the system.

WAGES.

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Apprentices usually serve without pay for the first half-year, and receive 2s. 6d. a week for the second, though sometimes they are paid 2s. 6d. per week for the first three months, and 5s. per week for the remainder of their term, while in a few cases they receive no pay during their apprenticeship. The weekly wages of other hands in the large retail establishments inspected are as follows:—

	Highest.	Lowest.	Average.
Improvers	12/6	3/6	7/10
Skirt-hands	22/6	11/6	15/9
Bodice hands	25/-	12/-	18/-
Sleeve hands	25/-	15/-	18/-
Machinists	27/6	12/6	22/-
Heads of tables	50/-	25/-	31/-
Skirt-drapers	60/-	30/-	37/-
Head dressmakers	140/-	30/-	71/-

The position of head dressmaker is frequently one of great responsibility, the promotion, as well as the wages of subordinates, usually resting entirely in her hands; heads of tables also have considerable authority over the employees, the allotment and supervision of the work being part of their duties. Machinists who receive more than 20s. per week are usually expected to provide their own machines, which is tantamount to a reduction of wages by the hire of a machine, generally about 2s. or 2s. 6d. per week.

In dressmakers' shops the weekly wages are lower, to the extent of about 10 per cent., than those paid by the large retail drapers, the rates paid being as follows:—

	Highest.	Lowest.	Average.
Improvers	16/-	5/-	6/10
Skirt hands	25/-	7/-	14/5
Bodice hands	25/-	10/-	16/-
Heads of tables	30/-	25/-	28/6
Head dressmakers	100/-	20/-	58/-

But few head dressmakers or heads of tables are employed in this branch of the industry, those functions being usually discharged by the proprietors themselves. Wages vary greatly in the different shops, and there is, besides, a wide range in the payments to workers of the same designation, the rate changing with the degree of skill and competence. There is always something new to learn in dressmaking, and girls who are quickest to follow the changes of fashion have but little difficulty in obtaining the highest rates. Excellent work is, nevertheless, sometimes poorly paid, unscrupulous employers being prompt to take advantage of the necessities, the helplessness, and the unorganised condition of this class of workers.

Between the small suburban retail shops and the home-workers there is keen competition, and to make the competition effective there is a general tendency to reduce wages to the lowest possible figure, the highest wage paid to an assistant by a home-worker never exceeding 20s. per week, and even this amount is given to very few, the average rates being as follows:—

Apprentices (excluding those not paid)	2s. 6d. per week.
Improvers	7s. 8d. „
Skirt hands	11s. 5d. „
Bodice hands	13s. 8d. „
Complete assistants	16s. 0d. „

Improvers are paid from 4s. to 16s. per week, skirt hands from 7s. 6d. to 15s., and bodice hands from 9s. to 18s., while persons describing themselves as complete assistants have been found working for 7s. a week. It is however frequently the case that girls doing the same kind of work are called 'improvers' in one place, and 'complete assistants' in another. In the employ of home-workers who have been visited there were twenty-one apprentices, some of whom were receiving no pay, and others up to 4s. per week, the average being 2s. 6d. per week.

Excluding the small but highly paid classes of head-dressmakers, skirt-drapers, and forewomen, and also the numerous class of apprentices receiving merely a nominal wage or no pay at all, the average wage per week for ordinary hands in retail establishments, is a fraction over 14s.; in dressmakers' shops it is 12s. 8d.; and taking the two classes of shops together it is 13s. 8d. These figures are based on the experience of nearly 700 workers, and may be accepted as fairly indicating the average rate of weekly wages prevailing in the trade. The average rates for the superior grades alone are 49s. 3d. and 41s. 6d. in the two classes of shops respectively. Including all classes of dressmakers, from improvers at 5s. a week, up to head-dressmakers at £7, the average wage all round is 17s. 6d. per week.

Dressmakers working in their own homes usually earn more than they would if employed in shops, for when a connection is once formed work is fairly plentiful and sufficiently profitable to afford them a rural subsistence. The average gross income for seventy-five houses visited is 65s. 5d.; but after paying assistants' wages, and making allowance for cases where two or more members of a family share in the proceeds, the average net income per head is 39s. 9d. per week.

Comparing the earnings of home-workers employing paid assistants with the earnings of those who employ none, the average net incomes per worker are 47s. 4d. and 31s. 5d. per week respectively. The assistants employed number about 2.5 per house, earning an average of 9s. 7d. each; or excluding nine unpaid apprentices, 10s. 5d. each per week. It would therefore appear that the advantage the homemaker derives from employing assistants is equal to 15s. 11d. per employer, and dividing by 2.5, the average number of assistants, this gives a profit to the employer of 6s. 4d. per week for each assistant employed.

EARNINGS.

The earnings of employees in dressmaking establishments at the weekly rates given above are affected by the fact that there are usually two slack periods in the dressmaking year, one in June and July, before the spring fashions come out, and one from December to February, before summer dresses begin to give way to autumn and winter costumes. At such times it is customary for employers to reduce their expenses by granting compulsory "holidays" for a week or a fortnight, or even longer, to most of their ordinary hands, that is, to all whose places could not readily be filled at short notice. Many girls being thus out of employment for a month or more every year their average earnings do not exceed £32 or £33 per annum. The greater number of the girls live with parents or relatives, and their earnings are usually subsidiary to the household income, but in some instances the small wage they earn forms the sole means of subsistence of girls thrown upon their own resources, a meagre pittance capable of affording them but little comfort. Very often girls profess to be independent of the necessity of following any trade, their parents being able to keep them, and that the desire for employment alone induces them to engage in dressmaking. This is for the most part a pleasing illusion, not confirmed by the fact that they are unwilling participants in the overtime system. Workers of the higher grades usually receive liberal salaries and maintain themselves in moderate comfort on their earnings. With the desire of learning to make their own clothes some girls take places in dressmakers' shops and work for a wage little more than sufficient to cover travelling expenses to and from the shop, and, long after attaining competent knowledge in that respect, such girls have been known to continue working merely for lack of distraction and occupation at home. Girls whose entire subsistence must be provided by the work of their own hands are obliged, when they can procure it, to take work to be done in the evenings not spent in gratuitous overtime work for their employers, but at the best they can earn no more than will suffice for the barest necessities of life. Their position becomes truly pitiable in slack times, when compulsory "holidays" are given to all whose services are not indispensable, and among these girls there is perhaps as much genuine hardship and suffering as anywhere else in the community.

COUNTRY DRESSMAKING.

As a rule, country dressmakers are slightly better off than metropolitan workers in the business, and their surroundings are in many respects superior. The establishments are usually small, the greatest number of assistants being employed by retail drapers, but the great bulk of the work is done in their own homes by independent workers, who rarely employ more than two or three assistants. In drapers' shops one good head dressmaker usually has entire charge of the work, at a wage of from £2 10s. to £5 a week, sometimes receiving, in addition, a bonus or percentage of the profits. The average weekly earnings of country dressmakers are as follows:—

Improvers	8/8
Bodice hands	19/3
Skirt hands	19/7
Head dressmakers	67/-

Improvers, however, are comparatively rare, apprentices generally serving two years in one establishment, and becoming fully qualified assistants on the completion of their term of probation. They pay no premiums, but learn the business thoroughly in all its branches, and receive higher wages than in Sydney, their pay usually being 2s. 6d. per week for the first half-year, with 2s. 6d. per week added for each half-year following.

PROFITS FROM DRESSMAKING.

As carried on in dressmakers' shop, and by independent home-workers, it has been seen that the business is fairly profitable, affording a fair income, especially in cases where paid assistants are employed. On the other hand, it is said that no profit is derived directly by retail drapers from the dressmaking department, which is carried on solely as a means of promoting sales in the retail department, proprietors, without exception, maintaining that so long as workrooms show no great loss, they are content with the profits derived from the sale of materials at retail prices. The books of some establishments certainly show a loss on the dressmaking, and in other cases the profits earned were small compared with the other branches of draper's business.

In the workrooms attached to the large retail drapers' establishments the most skilful artists commanding the highest salaries are employed, the highest average wages are paid, and the dresses made require the highest finish, and are, therefore, longer in hand than those of an inferior class. In dressmakers' shops the principals perform all the more expensive kinds of work, employ no highly paid assistants, and pay lower wages than the retail shops; their work does not require a high finish, and they can get through more work in a given time. These considerations are sufficient to account for the anomaly that retail drapers make little or no profit directly from dressmaking, while those who depend entirely upon it for their subsistence do find it remunerative.

HEALTH, &c.

On account of the confinement, the constant application, and the want of fresh air and exercise, the occupation of the dressmaker is not conducive to health. Long hours of work in a stooping position on seats which admit of little change of posture, in rooms during the summer too hot, during the winter too cold for comfort, and very often insufficiently ventilated, are sufficient to undermine even a strong constitution. Where girls are required to work overtime, especially on Saturday afternoons and evenings, when debility from want of food is superadded to the exhaustion and fatigue of incessant work for twelve or fourteen hours without rest, the evil effects soon make themselves visible in the pallid cheeks and lips, and other unmistakable signs of physical degeneration. In addition to this, no change of costume is insisted on in workrooms, so that girls who may be saturated with rain on their way to work in the morning are allowed to sit and work all day in wet clothes, and perhaps are even expected to go through
three

three or four hours of overtime in that state. Where the workers are not unduly pressed, have regular hours for food and rest, and their regular Saturday half-holiday, their health does not appear to suffer to any serious extent; on the contrary, many who have been a long time in the business declare themselves to be so far enamoured with it that they would be quite unable to give it up, and that it entails no injurious effects upon them, except from overwork.

Special attention has been directed to the investigation of charges of immorality levelled against dressmakers as a class, but as might have been expected these charges are found to be built up on the slenderest foundations. It is a universal experience that those who struggle to maintain themselves by honest industry have too much self-respecting pride to descend to such degradation, and that those whose self-respect is gone have no desire for steady industrious effort. Houses exhibiting external signs of connection with the business, but whose true character has become immediately apparent, have occasionally been observed, and to these are doubtless due the imputations referred to. As a rule, girls compelled to support themselves by their own exertions maintain a noble fight against immense odds, and work with an energy and perseverance beyond all praise.

Lying advertisements for numbers of assistants of various grades, inserted by employers who really want none, for the purpose of conveying a false impression of the magnitude of their businesses, and described by them as "tricks of trade," are a frequent cause of annoyance and disappointment to an industrious class of workers who deserve better treatment than to be subjected to expense and loss of time for the mere purpose of giving a fictitious inflation to a collapsing business.